**CHANGES THAT BRING GOD NEARER**

Sixty years after the Second Vatican Council, substantial changes are still going on in the Church. We are still shifting emphases in our teaching, remoulding social attitudes, and revising our religious practices. We’ve been confused at times. We're not always sure what to hold on to from the old, and what to accept of the new.

Mary is our best model of how to accept changes in the Church. Not all changes are for the good, but the ones that bring God nearer to us in our fellow men and women are always acceptable.

Mary’s parents had brought her up in the religious tradition of the Old Testament. In that tradition, God was far away, terrifying in his majesty. God's glory was so overpowering to the Israelites that no human being could survive coming too close to God. The Jews still will not pronounce the name that God revealed to Moses. They substitute it by “the Lord.”

Their most sacred possession was the Ark of the Covenant. It was a casket that held the Ten Commandments carved on stone. The Philistines captured it once (2 Sam 6), but the Israelites defeated them and had the precious box carried back to Jerusalem. At one stage of the procession, the load looked like falling off the ox's back. A priest steadied it, but God struck him dead on the spot for touching such a sacred object.

Mary was reared in this reverence for the crushing majesty of God. Her parents would have impressed on her a deep respect for God's infinite distance above our lowly human condition. *But Mary herself became the Ark of the covenant*. Her own body carried God's new arrangement with us. She carried Jesus, God's Son, the new alliance between God and his people, in person.

From then on, God is no longer far away in terrifying majesty, but close in human helplessness. This is the revelation of God that he has made known in Jesus, and Mary was the first to grasp it. But think of the upheaval she went through in her faith, the shift of emphasis in teaching, the changes it demanded in her social attitudes, the difference in her prayer‑life.

The gospels tell us twice that Mary “did not understand” (Luke 2:19, and 2:51). Mary continued to do what the Old Testament required of her. She presented her firstborn son in the Temple, she had him circumcised, and she was purified after giving birth. At the same time, she had to believe that God was as near to her as her own son. She heard God's word, and she kept it.

We may have had our problems accepting new religious language, such as English instead of Latin, inclusive instead of exclusive language, and even saying “the Holy Spirit” instead of “the Holy Ghost.” We may still want to confess our sins in the dark, in total privacy behind a screen. We may prefer to have the altar on high, and altar rails as a barrier between us and the holy place. How have we coped with communion in the hand? We may not want to be so familiar with God.

When we find ourselves confused about changes in the Church, think of Mary and the changes she had to live through. She experienced drastic changes and pondered them in her heart. She expected God to choose a Saviour born of a woman in the normal way. What happened was that she, a virgin, became the mother of God's only Son, without a human father. Mary was the first to absorb this turning upside down of her tradition of faith. She heard God's word, and she kept it.

We also need to ponder things in our heart. We need to reflect on what is going on in the world around us and in the Church.

First, we have to be attentive to what is happening, not only the negative but also the positive things. Read a reputable daily paper and a weekly Catholic paper.

God has gifted us with intelligence to sift information and to ask pertinent questions, to discover the truth about what is really going on, and to face up to it.

We need to be reasonable, to bring our feelings, our thoughts, and the facts together to make an informed judgment about critical issues and developments. We will be able to recognize the changes in society and in the Church that bring God nearer, and those that don’t.

Then we need to be responsible and to act on our human values and Christian principles. God’s word will come to us through this process of reflection. God is challenging us in our day to hear God's word and to keep it.